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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 13th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. SENGWE (Zimbabwe)

Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. MSELLE

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 118: PATTERN OF CONFERENCES (continued) (A/51/32, 125, 253, 268 and Corr.1 and 337)

1. Mrs. INCERA (Costa Rica), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that the effectiveness of Conference Services, so important for the proper functioning of the Organization, was in danger of being compromised by the budgetary restrictions, which would necessarily result in a reduction of the resources available to meet the conference-servicing needs during the biennium. The quality of documents in the six official languages might suffer, as would meeting services. In that context, it was especially troubling that 35 per cent of the request for interpretation services for meetings of regional and other major groupings had been denied. The Group of 77 and China endorsed the comments made on the matter by the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 58 of its report (A/51/32). They believed that priority should be given, in the allocation of conference rooms and interpretation services, to meetings of Member States. Thus they appealed to the Secretariat to ensure as far as possible that conference services would be assigned to regional and other major groupings, without detriment to the services provided to other bodies, in the revised calendar of conferences and meetings for 1997. It would be useful to have an idea of the cost involved thus far in the conference and documentation services provided to the five working groups of the General Assembly. Until the full impact of budgetary restrictions on conference servicing could be assessed more clearly, information would be welcome on the repercussions that delaying the introduction of technological innovations would have on the productivity gains envisaged. The Group of 77 and China had taken note of the effort to develop a cost-accounting system for conference services, and reiterated the view that in-house resources should suffice to develop the system without recourse to outside consultants.

2. The Group of 77 and China supported the recommendations set out in paragraphs 20 to 25 of the report of the Committee on Conferences. Efforts towards greater self-discipline in the use of conference services should continue and the Fifth Committee could set an example by concluding its work on time in order to avoid holding night and weekend meetings. It was unfortunate that the statistics on the use of conference services showed overall and average utilization factors well below 80 per cent. The statistics should, however, be used with caution because they might not necessarily reflect all the factors that had contributed to underutilization of services. It therefore seemed advisable for the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences to continue to hold consultations with the chairmen of bodies that had consistently utilized less than their allocated resources for the past three years. The measures set out in paragraphs 47, 49 and 50 of the report would be very likely to promote an active dialogue between Conference Services and the secretariats of intergovernmental bodies.

3. As paragraph 88 of the report of the Committee on Conferences indicated, it was still too early to judge the results of the experiment by the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space with the use of unedited transcripts rather than verbatim records of meetings. The Secretariat had given its assurance that

those General Assembly bodies which decided to follow its example for one meeting would be provided with both the unedited transcripts and the verbatim records or summary records to which they were entitled, in order to enable them to compare the results. The Group of 77 and China emphasized that the use of such transcripts was experimental and that they were in no case a substitute for the records to which each body was entitled. They endorsed paragraph 92 of the report regarding the length of reports requested by bodies, and recalled that the established page-limits were intended for information purposes only.

4. It was unfortunate that the Secretariat had not, as requested by the General Assembly in resolution 50/206 D, paragraph 3, provided proposals on facilitating access by developing countries to the optical disk system in all official languages. The Group of 77 and China endorsed the recommendation made by the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 96 of its report, and reiterated that traditional documentation continued to be indispensable so long as all 185 Member States were not linked to the Internet.

5. The Group of 77 and China supported paragraph 101, which encouraged the Secretariat to spare no effort to improve the quality of translation of documents in the six official languages. They reminded verbatim-record writers and précis-writers of the need to refer to texts of statements by delegations in the original language in order to reflect accurately the position of Member States.

6. The Group of 77 and China had taken note with great concern of paragraph 118 of the report discussing the impact of the Secretary-General's proposed savings (A/C.5/50/57) on the capacity of Conference Services to perform mandated activities. They recalled that the proposals had not yet been approved by the General Assembly. While taking note of the recommendation in paragraph 122 relating to host-country agreements, they believed that the conclusion of such agreements should not be a precondition for the holding of conferences.

7. The Group of 77 and China expected to receive detailed explanations from the Secretariat as to why recordings had been made of certain informal consultations, a practice that was unacceptable. Lastly, they thanked the Secretariat for its effective implementation of resolution 50/206 F and stressed the importance of continuing to provide facilities for bilateral meetings, in accordance with paragraph 2 of that resolution.

8. Mr. KEINEKO (Russian Federation) said that his delegation generally endorsed the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee on Conferences in its report, in particular those concerning the revised calendar of conferences for 1997, the meeting statistics for United Nations organs, the consultations with bodies that underutilized conference-servicing resources, and the control and limitation of documentation.

9. An effort was being made to start plenary meetings of the General Assembly and its Committees on time, and it was to be hoped that the practice would become more widespread in the future. A more effective and rational use of conference services of course required the collaboration of all the parties concerned. Coordination between the different administrative units providing

conference services, and between the Secretariat and Member States, should be developed in every way possible. The Committee on Conferences had in that connection played a very valuable role; the measures it proposed in paragraph 49 of its report merited speedy implementation. Along the same lines, the proposal put forward by Japan on the establishment of a conference-servicing coordination mechanism in Vienna should be looked into.

10. While Member States were expected, without prejudice to their entitlements, to show restraint in the number of meetings requested and the documentation required, at the same time the intended rationalization had to be supported by an efficient and reliable control mechanism. The efforts being made in that connection are too sporadic. It was regrettable that the cost-accounting system for conference services requested by the General Assembly in resolution 50/206 D, paragraph 1, had not yet been developed. His delegation would be interested in receiving an assessment of the usefulness of investments in new conference-servicing technologies, particularly in translation services, as it had already requested the previous year. It should be possible to perform those tasks using the Organization's internal resources, without calling upon outside consultants.

11. As regarded the control and limitation of documentation, his delegation supported, on the whole, the conclusions of the Committee on Conferences set out in paragraph 85 to 96 of its report, and underscored in particular the provisions concerning page-limits for documents and the need to implement paragraph 3 of resolution 50/206 D on facilitating the access of developing countries to the optical disk system. Also, while the experience of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space in substituting unedited transcripts for summary records seemed interesting in principle, it would be useful to receive confirmation of the results from the members of the Committee themselves.

12. His delegation, which had been one of the sponsors of resolution 50/11 on multilingualism, wished to stress that measures to improve conference servicing must not undermine the principle of parity of languages. Recently, that principle had been disregarded, at the expense of the Russian language. He called on the Secretariat to prevent such situations - which, in the case in question, had not been attributable to the Office of Conference and Support Services - from recurring in the future. Lastly, he supported the recommendation of the Committee on Conferences that audio recordings of informal consultations should not be made unless the body concerned decided otherwise.

AGENDA ITEM 116: PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1996-1997 (continued)
(A/50/7/Add.16, A/51/7/Add.1; A/C.5/50/57 and Add.1)

13. Mr. OWADE (Kenya) said that his delegation associated itself fully with the statement made by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. In the process of restructuring and reform, it was important not to lose sight of the main purposes and objectives of the Organization, as enshrined in the Charter. The budget process should be viewed as a means of giving effect to the mandates agreed upon by the Member States, not as a means of setting new priorities and objectives.

14. General Assembly resolution 41/213 remained the basic instrument that governed the budget process, and he welcomed the fact that the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions had reaffirmed the validity of that resolution in its reports (A/50/7/Add.16 and A/51/7/Add.1).

15. By its resolution 50/214, the Assembly had decided that savings in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1996-1997 would not affect the full implementation of mandated programmes and activities. Regrettably, the Secretary-General's report on the programme budget had neither indicated the budgetary and programmatic impact of the proposed budget reductions nor provided any justification for those reductions. It was therefore important that the Secretariat should provide all of the clarifications which had been sought by the Advisory Committee and by Member States on issues such as the vacancy rate, the abolition of permanent posts and the use of consultants or personnel hired on short-term contracts.

16. He was concerned to note that the budget allocation for the United Nations Environment Programme had been reduced by $823,800, ostensibly (according to the Secretary-General's report) in relation to participation in inter-agency meetings and liaison with multilateral development banks. He was also concerned that programmes funded through voluntary contributions continued to suffer from a lack of funds. He hoped that the medium-term plan would provide a comprehensive solution to some of those issues.

17. Lastly, he stressed that the budget process must give priority to the programmes of action agreed upon at recent international conferences, which had emphasized the Organization's crucial role in coordinating development activities.

18. Mr. ROSALES (Nicaragua) said that his delegation fully endorsed the views expressed by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. His delegation deplored the fact that, despite the many resolutions - including resolution 50/214 - in which the General Assembly had reaffirmed that it was the only body with competence to approve or change the Organization's programmes and activities, the Secretariat showed a growing tendency towards "self-management". Nicaragua regretted that, as noted by the Advisory Committee, the Secretary-General's report did not make clear what impact the proposed budget reductions would have on United Nations programmes or how the Organization would be able to carry out the mandates entrusted to it by the competent intergovernmental organs. Those bodies had not yet conducted a thorough review of the changes made to their programmes; those changes derived solely from decisions taken by the Secretariat.

19. He was particularly concerned about the high vacancy rate, especially in the Professional category and above, where it had risen to 11.8 per cent, or nearly twice the rate established by the Assembly in resolution 50/214. If such a vacancy rate was maintained up to the end of the biennium, it would inevitably hamper the implementation of ongoing programmes and activities. Likewise, although the abolition of posts required the express approval of the General Assembly, the Secretariat had undertaken wide-ranging staff reductions in spite of the principle of equitable geographical representation, to which countries such as Nicaragua attached particular importance. Moreover, the entire

framework for international cooperation would be threatened if the Secretariat made further cuts in the scant resources allocated to economic and social development programmes by maintaining a high vacancy rate in the regional economic commissions and in bodies such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

20. Nicaragua had reservations about the replacement of permanent Professional staff with personnel hired on short-term contracts or junior Professionals who were seconded and compensated by their Governments, since the latter did not always lay aside their own interests and objectives. In addition, it was common knowledge that, despite the recruitment freeze, new staff had been hired at various levels and current staff members, including some with permanent contracts, had been promoted or transferred without regard to their experience or area of expertise, or to the need for continuity in the work of the Organization.

AGENDA ITEM 120: HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT (continued) (A/51/304, A/51/421 and A/51/475; A/C.5/49/63 and A/C.5/49/64; A/C.5/50/64; A/C.5/51/1, A/C.5/51/2, A/C.5/51/3, A/C.5/51/6 and A/C.5/51/7)

21. Mr. SERME (Burkina Faso) associated himself with the statement made by the Costa Rican delegation on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. He drew attention to the report of the Secretary-General on the improvement of the status of women in the Secretariat (A/51/304) and stated that Burkina Faso, which had enabled women to participate in all spheres of activity since the 1960s, supported the Secretary-General's efforts to enhance the role of women in the Secretariat.

22. He recalled, nevertheless, that the target of 50/50 gender distribution overall by the year 2000 must be pursued within the legal framework established by Articles 8 and 101 of the Charter. In that connection, it was important to try to fill decision-making posts by seeking qualified female candidates. He noted that the percentage of women in posts subject to geographical distribution had increased by about 1 per cent a year, but felt that it was necessary to look beyond the figures to discern the sociological realities hidden behind them. He regretted that women were so poorly represented in Under-Secretary-General, Assistant Secretary-General and Director (D-2) posts, and that virtually none of those posts were occupied by women from developing countries. He agreed that posts subject to special language requirements should not be taken into account in measuring the progress made towards the goal of equality.

23. He welcomed the details given in the report on measures for the achievement of gender equality. However, the posts advertised in internal vacancy announcements should be distributed equitably between Headquarters and other offices (para. 11 (e)), care should be taken not to marginalize women from under-represented States (para. 11 (h)) and traditional recruitment networking should be maintained along with the posting of vacancies on the Internet (para. 24 (c)).

24. Burkina Faso was concerned about the issue of staff security, which was dealt with in the report of the Secretary-General on respect for the privileges and immunities of officials of the United Nations and the specialized agencies

and related organizations (A/C.5/51/3). However, while reaffirming its support for resolution 49/59 on the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel, his delegation wished to recall that the status of United Nations officials entailed not only rights, but responsibilities as well. He called on both the Member States and the staff members of the Organization to observe scrupulously the relevant provisions of Article 100 of the Charter.

The meeting rose at 11 a.m.